

Shotokutaishi laid the foundation of Japanese Buddhism

Shotokutaishi (聖徳太子= Prince Shotoku, 574–622) was a regent and a politician of the Asuka period(592–694) in Japan, and it's a well-known fact that he got Buddhism, introduced in 538 or 552, entrenched in Japan.

如来蔵(によらいぞう=Nyoraizo)

Nyoraizo, or tathagata-garbha in Sanscrit, means a thing which conceives Buddha nature(仏性) as a baby, and the idea of Nyoraizo claims that all beings have Buddha nature, that is, 一切衆生悉有仏性(いっさいしゅじょうしつうぶつしょう) which is a widespread expression in Japan.

Shotokutaishi said "Nyoraizo is great but a kind of paradox which can't be proved, and we have no choice but to believe it." By that he meant "It means Buddha nature lies in the worldly sins" suggesting "We can be saved in only the real world, not out of the real world."

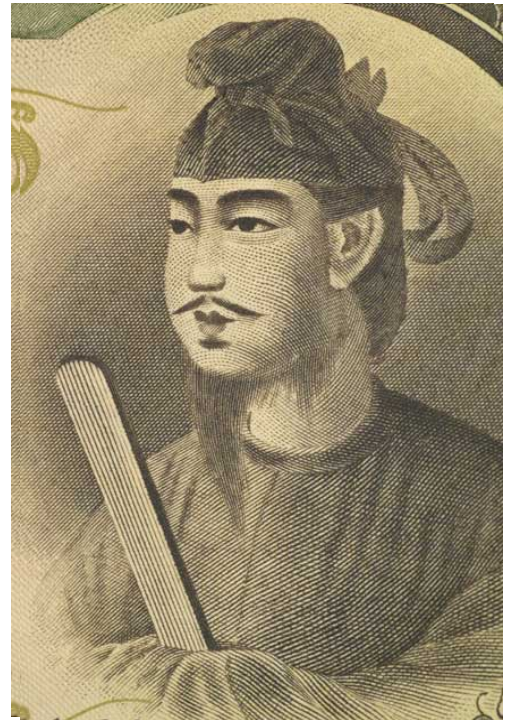
He was a man that didn't bury his head in the sand.

Actually, he had three wives who lived in Chuguji-, Hokkiji-, and Horinji-temples respectively; and they were jealous of each other.

Therefore, he must have been in the midst of the worldly sins.

Such a situation had him believe the idea of Nyraizo.

It's important to know he was such a realistic person.



一乗(いちじょう=Ichijo)

After Buddha's death, Buddhism was separated into two schools: Mahayana- and Hinayana-Buddhism.

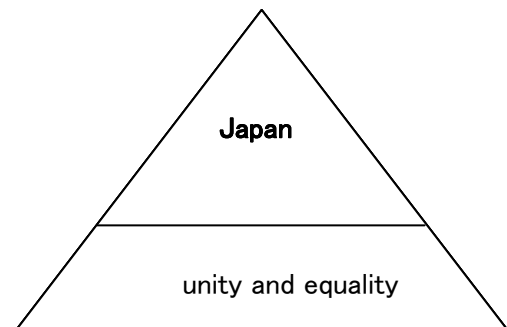
Ichijo, or Ekayana in Sanscrit, was the idea to re-unite the two.

While the traditional Buddhism didn't provide salvation for women,

Ichijo extends salvation for women and for even female dragons.

Thus, Ichijo is characterized by its intentionality to unity and equality.

Shotokutaishi thought that Ichijo was the most valuable idea in Buddhism and tried to put it in the base of Japan, that is, unity and equality.



Destruction of the uji-kabane system

It's really an epoch-making event that Buddha claimed equality between the 4 classes: Brahmin (priest class), Kushatoria (princes warrior caste), Vaishya (stratum), Shudora (rank slavery) in the midst of the Indian caste system. Since then, equality has been one of the ideals of Buddhism.

When Buddhism was introduced into Japan, 氏姓制度(しせいせいど=shiseiseido), or the uji-kabane system prevailed in the state. Uji, or a clan, was a group of people united by actual or perceived kinship and descent, while Kabane were hereditary titles to denote rank and political standing. The number of kabane was around 20.

This uji-kabane system was a kind of caste system and had been established through the process of the Yayoi people's dominance over the Jomon people. The system forced people to belong to their status and occupation according to their origin. Shotokutaishi, who tried to put Buddhism in the base of the state, almost ignored the uji-kabane system. For example, he gave an important post like the finance minister to Hata-no-Kawakatsu who belonged to a low status.

In fact, he established the court ranks, kan-i-junikai(12 grades of cap ranks), in 603, attempting to create a public official government instead of a powerful clan's regime derived from the uji-kabane system.

And in 604 he issued the 17 Article Constitution, teaching a mental attitude to the public officials as well as showing the basic principles of the new state.

He obviously tried to destroy the uji-kabane system and to create a united country under the rule of law which determined postings of officials regardless of social status.

In order to achieve his ideal, he emphasized Buddhism, particularly the idea of Ichijo: unity and equality.

Therefore, the 17 Article Constitution was full of the idea of equality.

Thus, Shotokutaishi could be called a revolutionist for he changed the social structure from the uji-kabane system state to the law-abiding state by making use of Buddhism.



Yumedono, Horyji-Temple that some experts regard as Shotokutaishi's mausoleum